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A CENTURY OF CHRISTIAN PROGRESS.

A PAPER

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BY

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It is proposed in this paper to consider the moral and Christian progress of the century just closed, in relation to the evangelization of the world.

Without attempting to trace the great stream of religious thought through all its varied windings and eddies, or to note all the various affluents that have modified its character, or helped to swell its volume, it will be enough for our purpose to mark the contrast presented at the beginning and close of the period under review.

The year 1776 marks an era of intellectual revolt against all old and established institutions. On the continent of Europe it was preëminently a revolt against everything that bore the name of, or was in any form connected with religion. The order of the Illuminati was then organized. In Catholic countries hatred of Romanism, as the ally of political despotism, had led to the expulsion of the Jesuits, from one country after another, till the formal suppression of the order, in 1773, and, later, to the abject humiliation of the Papal See, in 1799.

But, with the rejection of an ecclesiastical system that claimed a despotic control over the thoughts, the consciences, and the lives of men, and yet permitted the grossest immorality in the priesthood, and the deepest ignorance, and the coarsest superstitions among the people, was unhappily connected the rejection of all religion, and it was left to an infidel philosophy to reconstruct society, to remodel opinions, manners, and institutions. The language and the literature of France everywhere had the ascendant, and both were steeped in vice. Men of brilliant intellect, of marvelous command of style, of boldest speculation on all topics, sacred and profane, men profligate and false even to the ordinary decencies of private life, ruled the intellectual circles of Europe, from Paris to St. Petersburg. Christianity fared but poorly in the midst of such influences. The dominant intellectual philosophy left no ground for morals higher than a selfish prudence, and no basis whatever for the supernatural and spiritual in man. Orthodoxy was a synonym for ignorance and stupidity. The full results of these theories and speculations, of this undermining of the foundations of society, were in due time to be reaped at the very capital where the goddess of Reason had been enthroned, to the horror and disgust of the civilized world — once and for all, it is to be hoped — for the instruction of mankind.

The German and the English mind had been too profoundly pervaded by Christian thought to follow on to the same excesses, though bewildered and beclouded for a time. In Germany some Protestant theologians followed the example of the Archbishop of Paris, and renounced the religion they had been set to defend ; but the despised Pietists that centred at Halle, and the humble Moravians, faithful to the memories of Spener,

Franke, and Zinzendorf, despite their contempt of human learning, through a not very unnatural reaction against the literary circles of the time, kept the fire burning on the altars of a purer faith, till better days.

What the Pietists and the Moravians were to Germany, the Methodists were to England in this period of general religious declension, when apologies were deemed necessary for Christianity, and when public morality in high places was illustrated by the vices of the court, so scathingly set forth by the pen of Thackeray. Good men and women there were, both in the established church and among dissenters, notwithstanding the general coldness and indifference; but Protestantism, in England as elsewhere in Europe, as a whole, was powerless to meet the emergencies of the hour, and hardly able to withstand the tide of infidelity that, for a time, seemed likely to submerge all Christendom. In this country the great awakening of 1740 had revived the spirit of the fathers and inaugurated a period of revivals which continue to this day as a peculiar characteristic of American churches. Powerful revivals were enjoyed near the close of the Revolutionary War, in different sections, especially among the Baptists, and contributed largely to the preservation of evangelical religion during that trying time.

From the days of Eliot to Edwards, frequent attempts had been made for the religious instruction of the Indian races. Still there was no widespread missionary interest. The half-way covenant scheme, the widely prevailing practice of admitting to church ordinances persons of correct outward deportment without deep religious convictions, or any practical acquaintance with saving faith, hindered all true Christian activity, and helped to merge the church in the world. To this must be added the demoralization incident to war, and intercourse with distinguished French infidels and English Free Religionists, in consequence of their sympathy with the cause of American independence.

There was in England a Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the forerunner of the great Tract Societies, and a missionary organization with special reference to the spiritual needs of English colonists in different parts of the world, but doing something for the heathen, as among the North American Indians; and there was, to the honor, be it said, of evangelical Christians in Denmark, as an outgrowth of the Pietistic movement, a Foreign Missionary Society, known by its establishment of the Tranquebar Mission, and honorably represented during the last half of the eighteenth century by Schwartz, justly named the Apostle of India. This enterprise attracted the attention of English Christians, roused a good deal of superficial enthusiasm, that was expressed in contributions to the amount of a few hundred pounds, — eighty pounds a year for several years, — between 1760 and 1770. The Moravians, also, rich in faith though poor in this world's goods, and little esteemed by the great Protestant churches of the last century, had begun missions in Greenland and in the Indies, and shown the possibility of success in the most untoward circumstances. With the exception of these limited efforts nothing had been attempted in behalf of the heathen world.

Nor was there greater interest throughout Christendom in the manifold

varieties of home effort that enter so largely into the Christian life of our time. There were none of those home societies, embracing all possible interests, physical and intellectual, as well as distinctively religious, — none of the great home mission enterprises, no Sabbath-schools, no Bible Societies, little care for the poor and neglected classes. Though careful statistics belong rather to the agencies of the present generation, and are not available to any accurate estimate of former periods, it is certainly safe to say that the number of evangelical believing church members in this country at the present time is far greater than the entire number in Christendom in 1776; and it is not too much to say that there is more real aggressive power for the promotion of the cause of Christ put forth to-day, at home and abroad, by the Christians of Scotland, or of New England, than by all Protestantism a century ago.

Of the Greek and Oriental churches, — Christian in name rather than as aggressive forces in the interest of truth, — no account need here be taken.

The outlook for Christianity a hundred years since was certainly dreary enough. The science, the philosophy, the culture of the age were all against it. Its aggressive power seemed reduced to a minimum. The Protestantism of the Reformation had long since spent its force, turned back at first by the great Catholic reaction, then wasting its energies on internal conflicts and losing its independence by alliance with the State, and, at last, entering into a truce with its inveterate foe. In Great Britain the movement inaugurated by Whitefield and the Wesleys was yet in its infancy, and Protestant Christians generally shrunk back, in Pharisaic pride or indifference, from the frightful spectre that loomed up in France. In this country, whatever of Christian life there was, found ample exercise in the struggle for self-preservation.

And this was the aggressive power of Christendom a century ago. What a contrast is presented in the multiplied agencies of the present time. What an advance since then in the moral sentiment of the Protestant world. The Declaration of Independence, by its recognition of the rights of man, gave a new impulse to political morality. The age of Walpole, of Madame de Pompadour, of Frederick the Great, is no longer possible in Europe. The growth of constitutional governments, the extension of the right of suffrage, the progress in legislation, popular education by the state, the legal recognition of woman, the abolition of slavery and serfdom, are but so many steps in the development of a purer and more comprehensive political morality. A moral sense has been awakened that is shocked by political abuses in high places, as never before. This steady and healthful progress is found in Protestant countries, and emphatically in proportion to the strength and activity of their religious life, till "the strength and impulse" of the world are found to-day in those countries.

It is now the English language, saturated with Christian ideas, gathering up into itself the best thought of all the ages, that is the great agent of Christian civilization throughout the world; at this moment affecting the destinies and moulding the character of half the human race. French influence, so dominant in the literary world, has passed away. The ency-

clopedists have left but the shadow of a name. The Nazarene has triumphed.

The intense intellectual activity of a century since had no vital connection with the deeper spiritual wants of the race. It added not a single discovery to the sum of human knowledge, not a single invention even in the interest of material progress.[1] It was critical, not inventive; destructive, not constructive. The liberty of which it boasted was not freedom, but license; whose principles were developed and illustrated in the *salons* of Paris, and in the excesses of the rabble. Its illumination was not from above.

In the hour of Europe's supreme need there was nothing to meet the spiritual necessities of men, recoiling at first in disgust from the abuses of Romanism, and then from the greater abuses of an infidel philosophy, but to go back to the church of Rome; and the papal system, that seemed tottering to its fall, obtained a new lease of life. The concessions wrung from an infallible Pope, the temporal sovereignty lost, the ecclesiastical prerogatives surrendered, were redemanded by the same infallibility, and regained with the consent of the great Protestant powers after the fall of the first French empire, till, in later years, the papacy puts forth all the most arrogant claims of the Middle Ages, in utter defiance of the intelligence of the age, and in scorn of the lessons of history.

In Protestant countries the reaction took another form. While the hearts of the princes and captains had fainted and failed, and human defences of the faith had gone down before a sharp-sighted infidel criticism, the humble believers of the Sacramental Host had stood firm, never known they were beaten, and were at last left masters of the field. The power of an endless life was in them. They became the channels of grace, displaying itself in numerous and wide-spread revivals in this country during the last decade of the eighteenth century, and in a striking evangelical movement throughout Great Britain. In Germany, for fifty years, the Pietists contended with rationalistic tendencies, and steadily gained in the confidence and respect of the popular mind.

The missionary spirit of modern times was born of this great work of grace. Men brought to the knowledge of the truth seemed moved, as seldom before, by the impulse to make the gospel known to others. In England, the Baptists, inspired by the singular devotion of William Carey, were the first to organize for the foreign work, in 1792. The Congregationalists and others united in the London Missionary Society in 1795, and were followed by the Church Missionary Society in 1800.

In this country missionary work took definite form a little later. At first, individuals seem to have gone out as evangelists into destitute sections of the home field, at their own charges. Then numerous local societies were organized, as in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, to send the gospel to the Indians, and the settlers on the frontier. "The early years of the century," observes Mr. Punchard, in a manuscript volume not yet given to the world,[2] "were remarkable for the quickening of good men in good

[1] Carlyle, Essays, vol. ii. p. 74, Boston, 1860.

[2] To Mr. Punchard I am indebted for many facts here cited, of our early religious history.

works, for the multiplication of churches, missionary, Bible, and tract societies, and other Christian and benevolent associations, and for the effective measures everywhere adopted for the spread of religious truth, so that a general expectation prevailed among American Christians that the time was not far distant when the earth should be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea."

The necessity of educating more ministers led to the foundation of the first Theological Seminary, at Andover, in 1808. A committee of the General Association of Massachusetts, in 1809, was led, by the cheering reports from all quarters, to anticipate the near approach of the millennial glory. The same year it was stated by Dr. Griffin, that as much had been done in the fourteen years preceding, to promote evangelical missions, as in almost as many previous centuries. At such a time of religious interest it is not strange that men should turn their thoughts to the duty of preaching Christ in foreign lands, and the next year, 1810, witnessed the organization of the American Board. The great societies for home and foreign missions, both in this country and in Great Britain, gathered up into larger bodies, and gave wise direction to many local committees and associations.

The missionary period of the church was thus inaugurated; the great movement begun that has gone on broadening and deepening till it includes all the leading evangelical denominations of Christendom; till more than fifty millions of dollars have been devoted to the circulation of the Scriptures in all the principal languages spoken among men; till we know not how many millions more have been devoted to the circulation of a Christian literature, and to the development of that vast system of home charities reaching not only to the lonely settler on the distant frontier, to the humble freedman at the South, but to every form of human misery and suffering; till the helpless poor, the blind, and the insane live in palaces; till the freewill offerings of Christian hearts, in sympathy for the perishing in heathen lands, who can make no return but their grateful love, have amounted to more than $100,000,000; till tens of thousands of cultured men and women have given up all the attractions of Christian homes, and the opportunities of Christian society, for the greater privilege of making known the unsearchable riches of Christ among the Gentiles; till among all the leading tribes and nations of men, the voice of the preacher has been heard, and the gospel has proved itself to be the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, and Christianity is seen to be the one religion for mankind.

In marvelous correspondence with this awakened missionary spirit, and opening the way for its exercise, have been the developments of Providence. The barriers that separated nations have been broken down; peoples afar off have been brought nigh, even to our doors; the inventions, the discoveries of science, the railway, the steamer, the telegraph, the improved press, the respect won for Christian nations by every advance in social progress — all are tributary to the cause of Christ.

What preparation for the coming glory! What vast illustrations of the benign power of the gospel in developing the possibilities of humanity, in quickening thought and activity, pervading all institutions, trembling in

the accents of human speech, till the child in a Christian land takes up unconsciously into his intellectual and moral character more of knowledge, more of practical wisdom, than was dreamed of a century ago. The common sense of to-day is thus enriched by the thought and the experience of the centuries. And yet there is indifference, and infidelity, and contempt of the Christian faith in certain circles, as there was a century ago, and material science makes its assaults on the bulwarks that gird it round. Yes — useful as so many wholesome irritants of Christian thought.

"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day, and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

We are come again to an age of intellectual revolt against the errors and the superstitions of the past. It is not confined to the realm of Christendom, but embraces large sections of the heathen world, and soon must embrace them all. The light of modern civilization is shining in on the dark places of the earth, and men are waking from the stupor of ages. Once more leading minds of Catholic countries are rejecting the arrogance and the pretensions of Romanism. The Jesuit is no longer tolerated in many of the Catholic states. The wail of the Papacy over the irreligion and infidelity of the times is unhappily true wherever Romanism has sway. "Irreligion," writes one long resident in Italy, "in hybrid forms, covers the land. For Popery there is no fear. It has lost all hold on the intelligence of the country."[1] Thus Romanism, where best known and illustrated, is rejected by the thinking classes. Shall they be offered a purer faith?

The opportunity presented to Protestantism in 1776, and in subsequent years, was lost. In the next great movement of 1848, something was done in the interest of the gospel by Bible societies and committees of various kinds, especially in Great Britain. The Waldenses emerged from their Alpine fastnesses, and thousands of Bibles were scattered in Spain, Italy, and France. The work thus begun has been followed up but feebly by missionary societies of this country and in the old world. The results that have followed wisely directed effort are all that the most sanguine could have anticipated, but the effort has been utterly inadequate to the pressing need. It is a grave question for the Christian church to consider, whether the millions of Catholic lands shall be left to drift off into hopeless indifference and enmity to all religion. If it be said that they have, or might find in the Catholic church, the substance of the gospel, we only point to the painful fact of the prevailing infidelity among the educated minds.

A like intellectual revolt is in rapid progress in India, as the result of the great educational work there going forward, largely under the auspices of the English government. Thousands of young men are passing out of the schools and colleges, no longer able to accept the crude superstitions of their fathers, but untaught in the gospel. The destructive agencies are greatly in excess of the constructive. The old religious faiths are giving way and no substitute is offered. The missionary agencies are altogether

[1] Dr. McDougall, Florence.

inadequate to the crisis. The golden opportunity is passing. The same is true of Japan. Buddhism, Shintooism, Confucianism, seem fast losing their hold on the popular mind, and multitudes are eagerly waiting for the truth. The millions of China, also, will soon be on our hands. Need we speak of the Turkish Empire, and its urgent need at the present moment of wise, thoughtful, Christian statesmen to guide its affairs, and of influential minds in all departments of thought and activity, such as only a true Christian faith can develop, such as we hope may be developed yet by agencies now in operation? And Africa, — thrown open of late by English arms, and still more by the patient, untiring, sublime devotion of Livingstone, — what shall be said of the claims of that land on the Christian world, and emphatically on this country?

The field is the world. As never before in human history, the field is the world. The church is prepared for the work as never before. All things are ready, waiting for the grand forward movement, that shall put the Word of Life into the hands of every son and daughter of the human race. The results of missionary effort are already indicative of such a consummation at no distant day. It is only a question of time. Four thousand devoted men and women, educated in the best learning of the day, are bearing the seeds of Christian civilization round the world. They are scattered through the Turkish Empire, and among the millions of India; they are found in the open ports of China and threading their way up its great rivers; their words find crowds of eager listeners in the new world of Japan; they brave the fevers of the Gold Coast, and from the Cape of Good Hope are planning conquests in the interior of Africa; songs of praise from hundreds of islands in the Pacific attest their presence; and they risk their lives at the hands of fanatics in papal lands, that they may make known the simple story of the cross. Half a million of souls won to Christ, and a Christian community of nearly two millions who have come out of the darkness and the superstition of centuries, often at the loss of all things, are tokens of the Divine blessing on their labors; till the progress of modern missions, in the last seventy years, exceeds that of the first seventy of the apostolic age.

We are permitted to have part in the third great movement of the Holy Spirit for the full accomplishment of the Redeemer's work. The first, beginning with the mission of the Apostles and the day of Pentecost, was mainly restricted by the bounds of the Roman Empire; the second, marking the period of the Reformation, did not pass the limits of Christendom; the third, in this missionary period, embraces the world; and the vision of the Psalmist and the burden of prophecy — that "all nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord, and shall glorify Thy name" — seem for the first time near to fulfillment.

It is a critical moment. There is a tide in the affairs of missions as of men, that taken at the flood leads on to fortune. What now is the dictate of a wise economy? Is it to let the present opportunities pass but half improved; to let the millions now waking to new life become cold and indifferent, or hostile to all religion, through the influence of an ungodly, materialistic civilization, in the expectation of bringing them to Christ at

some future time; to leave the missionary forces in the field but half supplied with the means they require to their most efficient action; to cry "halt," to the advancing columns of the Lord's hosts, and bid them retrench in their plans and efforts in the face of a disheartened foe, instead of pressing on to victory?

May we not safely and wisely go forward to do the Lord's work, in obedience to his command, and as He opens the way? Are not all other objects, — civilization, culture, the welfare of our families, personal enjoyments, — to be subordinated to this?

Is not this the one great duty laid on Christians in this land, pressed upon us by all the marvelous Providences of our past history, by our unexampled growth in prosperity as a people, realizing, as nowhere else, the full fruitage of Christian ideas and Christian institutions? Is it of no significance that with this growth in material welfare and in political power there has been a still greater development of the Christian church; that the number of church members has increased nearly three times as fast as the population; that the one evangelical minister to 2,400 souls in 1776 is represented to-day by one for every 700? And then, as if it were not enough to multiply ministers, Young Men's Christian Associations have been called into existence, to carry the gospel into all the by-ways and hedges of our social life. And in these last days a spirit of grace has been poured out on our Christian laymen to make them evangelists to the masses, and to give new illustration to the power of the simple Gospel of Christ; and last, but not least, upon our Christian women, too, from the Aroostook to the Golden Gate, that they may pour life and light upon the darkened minds and hearts of their sisters in heathen lands.

What is the meaning of this vast accumulation of spiritual forces, of this special blessing of God on American Christians, but a call to go forward and win the world for Christ?

This country is already evangelized. No man need here fail of a knowledge of the way of life. The facts just stated show this. All denominations vie in the race toward the setting sun, till in a town of twelve thousand people more than twenty churches are found struggling for life — for the survival not always of the fittest. And this, when hundreds, not to say thousands of such cities in China and Japan, and millions of immortal souls, not only in China and Japan, but in India and Africa, with all their undeveloped possibilities of manhood and womanhood, and heirship to a heavenly inheritance, have not yet heard that there is any Christ.

What more fitting time than on this Centennial year, for the church of Christ in these United States to arise and shine, the glory of the Lord being risen upon her? What more fitting time to organize a grand movement, to make the next century glorious for the triumphs of the gospel in all the earth? What so conclusive, so overwhelming an argument against the infidelity of the time? What so potent agency to stem the materialism and the secular spirit that makes so many professed Christians indifferent to all Christian objects and ends of life that do not stand in immediate connection with their personal convenience or the welfare and

social position of their families, that finds its way into our higher institutions of learning, turning the thoughts of our Christian youth to mere literary and scientific culture, instead of leading them to consecrate their powers and attainments to self-denying labor and sacrifice for the cause of Christ?

Oh for a baptism of the Holy Ghost, as on the day of Pentecost, filling us here to-day, and filling all Christian hearts in this land, with a just sense of the great opportunity, of the great duty and the greater privilege of service for Christ in this eventful time, and giving to all the one controlling purpose, and the sufficient grace, to live henceforth not unto ourselves, but unto Christ, and for the evangelization of the world He has redeemed.